



Ministry WITH the Poor: Doing For; Doing With; Being With

by Paul Slentz

A conversation about ministry “with” the poor should start with one important reminder: the poor are indeed in ministry.

I didn’t always know that this was the case. Growing up in a suburban church, which supported an inner-city congregation with dollars and volunteers, I believed that poor people were recipients rather than doers of ministry. I didn’t have any direct contact with the downtown church and so thought of its members exclusively as people my church did things “for.” That perspective was partly due to my youthfully narrow experience of the world generally. Yet, I wonder if it is not shared to some degree by many middle-class Christians of all ages, most of whom also have limited personal connection with the poor. And since the United Methodist Church is largely a middle-class church, we may be particularly susceptible to thinking of the poor as objects rather than subjects of ministry. But all one has to do is live, work, or do ministry in an impoverished area, even for just a short while, to have all doubts dispelled as to whether poor people are living out their baptismal call to be ministers of the Gospel.

For the past twelve years, it has been my privilege to be pastor of Sixty-First Avenue United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tenn. Ours is a small congregation of seventy that is made up, with a few exceptions, of persons whose incomes are below the poverty level. Many of our members are homeless or formerly homeless. Many live on fixed incomes due to disability or age.

Others have low-paying, often part-time jobs. And almost all of them are engaged to one degree or another in ministries of service to and with other struggling folk—whether it be preparing and serving a meal for all comers before our Saturday night worship, weatherizing the homes of senior neighbors, or helping to distribute toys to 3,000 children from all over the city at Christmas time. Recently one of the leaders of my congregation who worked most of her life in a small non-union factory, never making above \$10 an hour, bathed a severely disabled homeless woman in the restroom just before one of our services. When I thanked her for that act of mercy and told her how Christ-like it was, she shrugged off the praise and said she had worked as a tech in a nursing home earlier in her life and it wasn’t any big deal. So we must make no mistake about it: the poor are in ministry!

However, and this is a big “however,” the low-income members of my congregation can’t do this ministry (at least not to the same extent) without the involvement of sister United Methodist churches. My salary as pastor is paid for by sister churches. Donations from churches and individuals help us keep the lights on. Tens of thousands of dollars are offered for specific ministries. And, most important, hundreds of individuals give of their time to work alongside our church members in all we do. The “connection” is what makes effective ministry “with the poor” possible.

Now, what I have found is that when sister churches are in

ministry with us, there are three main levels of engagement, each important and each deeper than the next: Doing For; Doing With; and Being With. Our primary partner in ministry, First UMC in Franklin, Tenn.—a 3,000 member congregation just south of Nashville—illustrates all three levels.

Doing For

“Doing for” is how most churches relate to low-income folk. As I have already noted, this is absolutely essential. We would be hard-pressed to keep our doors open without “doing for” assistance. Franklin First UMC has us in its budget, supporting programming, a good piece of my salary, and all of my housing allowance. Also, many individuals and some Sunday school classes send checks to support our ministries. In addition, one of the Sunday school classes has organized an annual Cherub Tree where church members “adopt” children who are in our After School Program and their siblings to provide gifts for them at Christmas time. Another class regularly cuts the lawn of one our senior neighbors. And a number of Sunday school classes regularly cook and serve the supper before our Saturday evening worship services.

As is evident, this “doing for” engagement doesn’t allow for much community building, but the services are still necessary. Jesus and his disciples had this type of relationship with many of the people they were in ministry to. When you feed 5,000 you just can’t get to know them all.

Doing With

“Doing with” moves to a deeper level of engagement and can result in the building of lasting relationships. This happens in many different settings in the partnership between the Franklin First and Sixty-First Avenue churches. Recently this “doing with” has been expressed in a powerful way in the formation of a “Light in the Nations” neighborhood ministry, so called because the neighborhood in which my congregation is located is called “The Nations.” The leadership is made up of members from both congregations and the community. The president and treasurer are low-income members of Sixty-First Avenue. The vice-president and secretary are members of Franklin First. The work that Light in the Nations does—mostly caring for senior neighbors and putting on an annual community street carnival and health fair—is done cooperatively by members of both churches.

One critical key to the success of the “doing with” that happens in this ministry is that the more affluent, better educated, more used-to-being-listened-to members of Franklin First have been very intentional about not forcing an agenda on the group. They have been excellent listeners and have given up some of their social power to make sure that the voices of the low-income, less-educated, more used-to-not-being-listened-to members of Sixty-First Avenue Church are in fact heard! They have clearly integrated Jesus’ instructions to his disciples to not use their position of power to lord it over others but rather to use that power to serve.

Being With

Ministry with the poor takes on its greatest depth in the context of “being with” the poor. Here there is not a “doing” agenda, not something that particularly has to get done. There is simply a being together that can chip away at the barriers of race, class, educational level, etc. In the relationship between members of Franklin First and Sixty-First I find that this happens in the spaces before and after meetings, when folks just sit around and

talk. It happens on rides to and from work projects. It happens when Franklin First servers at our Saturday evening meals take off their aprons, come out from behind the kitchen counter, and sit down and eat with members of my congregation. It happens when folks make long-term commitments to be present (one of our church school teachers is a member from Franklin First who has been teaching for all fourteen years of the partnership). Most profoundly, it happens in worship. Worship, when done right, can be the most powerful barrier breaker. In worship, doctors, lawyers, and teachers from Franklin First sit side by side with roofers, painters, and unemployed members of Sixty-First. We sing together, pray together, confess sins together, and meet at the Lord’s Table together. As we bow before God, it is our common humanity, our common need for grace, our common profession of Christ as savior and Lord, not our differences, that come to the fore. “Being with” is a foretaste of the kingdom.

In summary, the poor are in ministry. They are in ministry when they say a word of encouragement to a troubled teen who has been arrested for vandalism. They are in ministry when they



Action Step

Host a meal at which your church members and the poor of your community can sit and eat together and be in conversation. Ask your guests what they are doing for those in need and how you can assist them with these services. Invite them to participate in both the leadership and operation of the ministries you sponsor.

take a laid-off relative into what is usually an already crowded space. They are in ministry when they share from their refrigerators with a hungry neighbor whose food stamps won’t be coming for another week. To the extent that they are followers of Christ and have their eyes open to the needs all around them, they are constantly in ministry. And they are effective in ministry, especially ministry with “the least of these” because they really know them. The “least” are their people—their family members, their neighbors, their fellow workers. Yes, the poor are in ministry.

If we, who are more affluent, would be in ministry with them, the opportunities are endless. We can “do for” (write a check, organize a food drive, pay a light bill), and that is necessary. We can “do with” (weatherize a senior’s home together, organize a neighborhood watch group together, plant a community garden), and that moves us closer. We can “be with” (invite folks into our homes, arrive early and leave late from meetings to just talk about anything, kneel together in worship), and that unites us. Thanks be to God for all these ways to be in ministry with our brothers and sisters who are poor. □



Paul Slentz is Pastor of Sixty-First Avenue United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tenn.